

THE MAYFAIR BIOGRAPHS

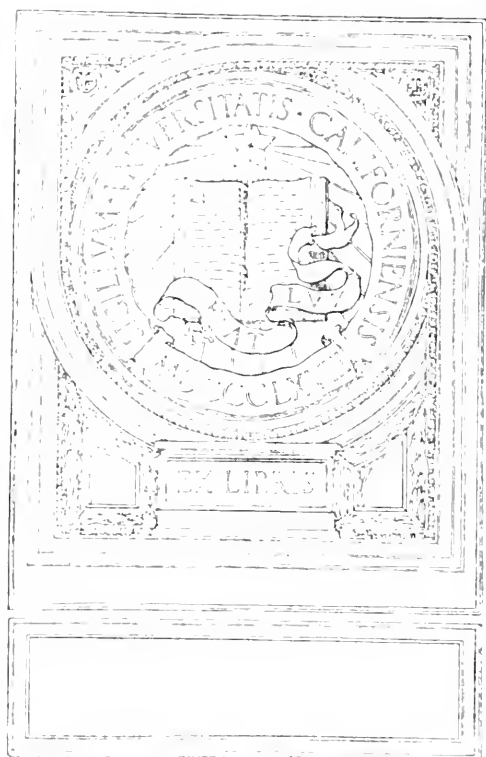
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MENDELSSOHN

BY
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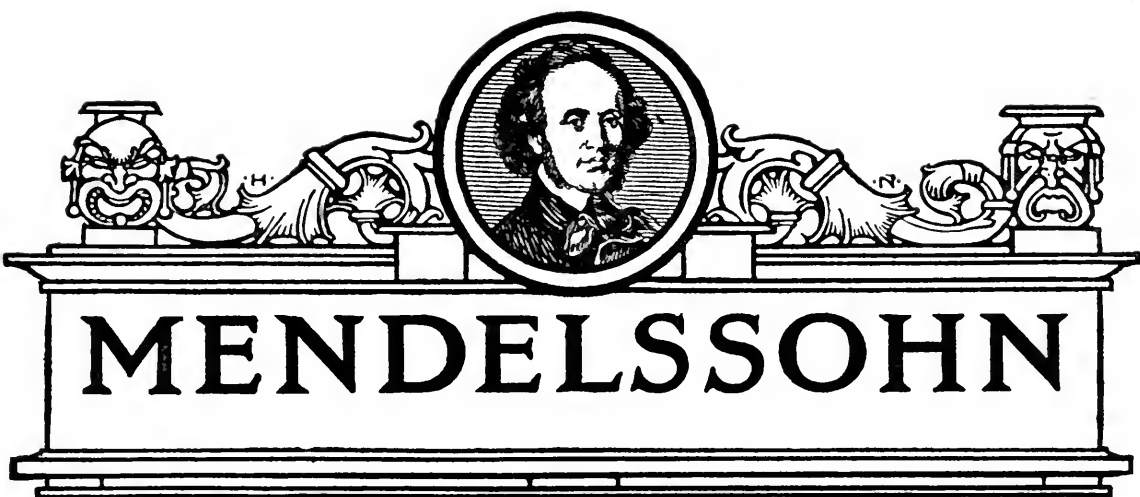


J. L. FELIX MENDELSSOHN-BARTHOLDY

Born at Hamburg. February 3rd, 1809.
Died at Leipzig, November 4th, 1847.

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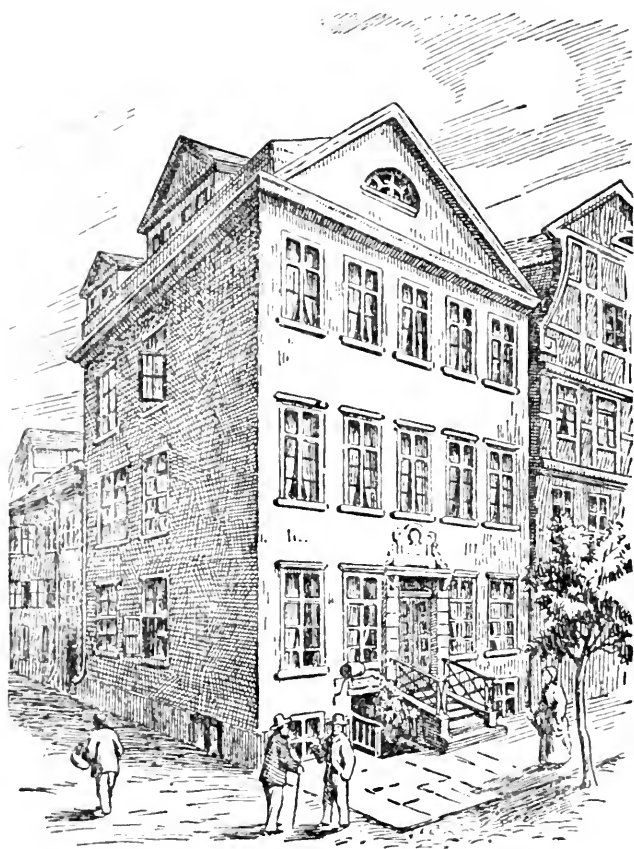
ENDELSSOHN may truly be said to have been born with the proverbial silver spoon in his mouth. His father, the son of the celebrated philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, was himself a merchant in opulent circumstances, and the subject of this little monograph, from his childhood upwards, was free from those cares and struggles which fall to the lot of most musicians,

at all events in the earlier stages of their career. In addition to this and to his musical genius, Nature had lavished on him a number of those other gifts which, as a rule, she doles out singly and with a niggardly hand. He was a first-rate linguist and a good classical scholar (for his matriculation essay at the Berlin University he wrote a translation in verse of Terence's *Andria*, which was afterwards published), he excelled in landscape drawing—an accomplishment in which he always took great delight—and his literary abilities were certainly of no mean order, to judge from the charming letters to his family and friends, his many criticisms on Art, and the glowing descriptions of the places and scenery he visited while on his travels.

To crown all this he possessed a happy and lovable disposition; affectionate in all his domestic relations; staunch to his friends; highly sensitive and impressionable to his surroundings; loving all that was good and true in Nature and Art; incapable of a mean action; and kindly

and genial in manner towards all those with whom he came into contact : in a word, totally unspoilt to the end by the success and fame which he won so quickly and easily. Such was the character of the man who, during

his lifetime and for many years afterwards, was perhaps the most admired and popular of all composers.



MENDELSSOHN'S BIRTHPLACE, HAMBURG.

Jacob Ludwig Felix Mendelssohn - Bartholdy, to give his name in full, was born at Hamburg on 3rd February 1809. The surname Bartholdy was added by the elder Mendelssohn at the instigation of his brother-in-law (who had also adopted it) shortly before the family's conversion from the Jewish to the Christian faith ; but though both names are usually to be found on the title-page of the composer's works, the latter

was soon abandoned, at least as far as his public life was concerned, and fame knows him almost entirely as Felix Mendelssohn.

In 1811 the family removed to Berlin, which city became, with intervals, the young composer's home for the next twenty-two years, and where his general education and musical studies (under Zelter and Ludwig Berger) were begun and completed. Although, considering his precocious nature, he must undoubtedly have tried his hand at something more than mere theoretical exercises in his early childhood, he does not appear to have begun systematic composition until he was eleven

years old, from which time he devoted himself assiduously to his art, composing during the next four or five years numberless movements of symphonies, trios, sonatas, etc., vocal and instrumental pieces, and as many as four operas. Many of these were performed in private at the musical parties which his parents often gave, and thus the young Felix had the advantage of hearing his juvenile efforts and even of conducting them himself. One of his early operettas, 'The Wedding of Camacho,' was performed publicly at the theatre, but, owing to the illness of the tenor, was withdrawn after the first night and never again revived.

But it was not until the composition of the Oetet for Strings in 1825 that Mendelssohn may be said to have thrown aside the student's garb and put on the mantle of the fully developed composer, and even that work, precocious as it was for a boy of sixteen, was surpassed in all respects by the Overture to the *Midsummer Night's Dream*, written the following year, and which, on account of its originality and beauty, at once stamped him, even at that early age, as a composer of rare genius.



MENDELSSOHN IN HIS 12TH YEAR.

It would be impossible in this short article to give a complete biography of Mendelssohn's busy life and career. Although, as stated before, he did not depend for his livelihood on his art, yet no artist ever worked harder or more conscientiously than he did during the brief span of life that fate allotted to him.

In 1829, after a further period of three years (during which he attended the university and composed many works, including the Overture 'Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage,' the Quartet in A minor, and others), he paid his first visit to London, which city was to be the starting-point of a long tour through Europe, planned with the object of increasing his knowledge of the world and general culture, and also of making himself

and his compositions more widely known, though this latter intention, owing to his fortunate circumstances, was but a secondary consideration at the moment. He remained in London some months, making many friends, playing in public, and conducting his first Symphony in C minor, the *Midsummer Night's Dream* Overture, etc., at the Philharmonic and other concerts. A trip to Scotland followed next, then after returning to London for the winter months, he proceeded to Weimar and Munich, and subsequently to Austria, Italy, Switzerland, and Paris, visiting London for the third time in April 1832, and finally back to Berlin in July of the same year.

Mendelssohn's letters during all this period are delightful reading, brimful of high spirits, serious and bright and amusing by turns; nothing seems to escape his notice, from the costume of a peasant girl to an Easter procession in Rome. He is keenly alive to the beauties of Nature and Art, and to the novelty (to him) of the scenes and places he visits, and he writes about it all with a boyish enthusiasm and, at the same time, an intelligent perception which give one a deep insight into the refinement and intellectuality of his mind. His remarks about the celebrated people he meets are always interesting, and show a reverence for greatness which is not seldom wanting in the very young man.

The following is his description of the great sculptor Thorwaldsen, whose acquaintance he made in Rome: 'I honour him as one of the greatest of men. . . . He looks like a lion, and the very sight of his face is invigorating. You feel at once that he must be a noble artist; his eyes look so clear, as if with him every object must assume a definite form and image. Moreover, he is very gentle and kind and mild, because his nature is so superior. . . . It is a real source of pleasure to see a great man, and to know that the creator of works that will endure for ever stands before you in person; a living being, with all his attributes and individuality and genius, and yet a man like others.'

His criticisms on the great Italian painters, if perhaps somewhat crude, are always spontaneous, and show how strongly his poetic and imaginative nature is affected by them. Take, for example, the account

of Titian's 'Assumption,' contained in one of his letters to his parents while in Venice: 'If I am to speak of Titian I must do so in a more reverent mood. Till now I never knew that he was the felicitous artist I have this day seen him to be . . .; he has fathomed the depths of human sorrow, as well as the joys of heaven. . . . How Mary floats on the cloud, while an actual *air* seems to pervade the whole picture; how you see at a glance her very breathing, her awe, her devotion, and in short a thousand feelings—all words seem poor and commonplace in comparison! The three heads of angels too . . . are of the highest order of beauty—pure, serene loveliness, so unconscious, so bright and so seraphic.'

But, above all, what seems to appeal to him most, as it does to nearly all artistic natures, is the grandeur and beauty of the Swiss mountains and glaciers.

'Yesterday,' he writes, 'at the hour of sunset, I was passing up and down in front of the house, and each time that I turned my back on the mountains, I endeavoured vividly to represent to myself these gigantic masses, and each time, when I again faced them, they far exceeded my previous conceptions. . . . The hills have been clear and lovely ever since I arrived. The snow pure, and sharply defined, and apparently near in the dark blue atmosphere; the glaciers thundering unremittingly, as the ice is melting; the gathering clouds lying lightly on the base of the mountains, whose summits stand forth clear above. Would that we could see them together!'

Then again:—

'How beautiful Interlaken is! How humble and insignificant we feel when we see how splendid the good Lord has made the world; and nowhere can you see it in greater magnificence than here.'

This is one of his descriptions of the glaciers:—

'They are indeed the most marvellous monsters in the world. How strangely they are all tumbled about; here a row of jagged points, there toppling crags, and above, towers and bastions, while on every side crevices and ravines are visible, all of the most wondrous pure ice, that rejects all soil of earth, casting up again on the surface the stones, sand, and gravel, flung down by the mountains. Then the superb colouring

when the sun shines on them . . . then the ominous crashing and thundering, and the rushing of so many springs near and around. They are splendid miracles.'

Many other interesting excerpts from the letters of this period might be quoted, but the above will suffice to show the keen enjoyment the young composer derived from his travels, his intelligent appreciation of all he saw and did, and the deep impression which the natural and artistic beauties of the places he visited made upon his young and enthusiastic mind. They will also give some idea of that gift of fluent and expressive penmanship to which allusion has already been made, and which no one who has read the letters themselves can deny that he possessed to a more than usual extent.

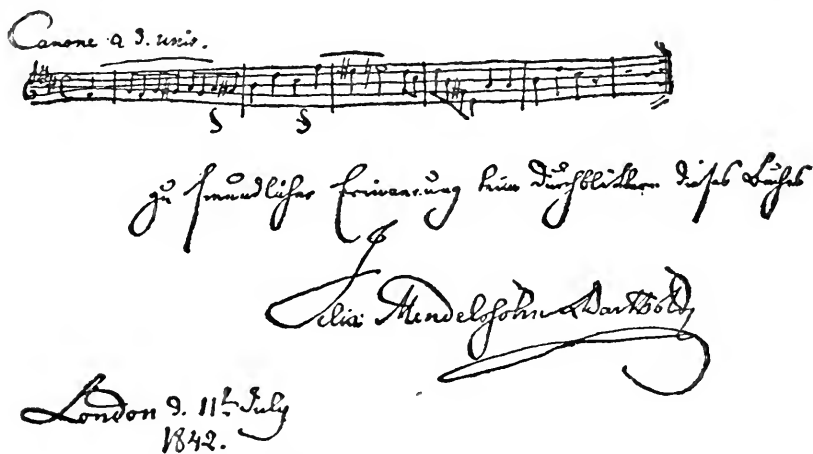
It must not be supposed that all this while Mendelssohn neglected his art. In the midst of all his novel surroundings, all his sight-seeing and pleasant association with his many friends and acquaintances, he found, or rather made, time to compose a great deal. To an imaginative nature like his, the impressions he derived from his varied experiences; the gloom of the North; the light and colour of the South; in a word, the constantly changing character of the scenes in which he found himself, were bound to bear fruit, and the result was the inception of several important works. His visit to the Highlands inspired the 'Hebrides' Overture, the 'Scotch' Symphony, and the Fantasia in F sharp minor; Italy was responsible for the 'Italian' Symphony; and his intercourse with Goethe in Weimar for the 'Walpurgis Night.'

Some of these works he completed during his sojourn abroad; others, like the two Symphonies, he brought to a more or less advanced state. Besides these he wrote (in London) the Symphony in D, known as the 'Reformation,' the Piano Concerto in G minor, which he played for the first time in Munich, and several other smaller works.

His return to Berlin in the summer of 1832 was followed by an appointment in Düsseldorf as director and superintendent of all the music in that town. This position, however, he did not hold for very long: his duties, especially those in connection with the theatre, had

become distasteful to him, and he gladly accepted an offer made to him to go to Leipzig as conductor of the Gewandhaus Concerts there.

The winters were now spent in that city, the summer months being passed either in Berlin, or fulfilling engagements as conductor of the Rhine Festivals, in Frankfurt, in London, and elsewhere. In 1841 he again went to reside in Berlin, at the express desire of the then King of Prussia, Frederick William IV., as Court Kapellmeister and director of the musical classes of the new Academy of Arts which the King proposed to establish; but the worries and intrigues which surrounded him on all sides made his life there very irksome, and, the project of the new Academy



FACSIMILE FROM A LETTER WRITTEN IN JULY 1842.

having fallen through, he obtained his release from the King, with permission to live where he liked, but at the same time acceding to the request that he should come to Berlin periodically to conduct the Cathedral Choir and also compose music to some of the King's favourite tragedies, *Athalie*, *Œdipus*, *Antigone*, etc. Eventually, after a period of comparative rest, and visits to Berlin, London, and other places in fulfilment of his professional engagements, he took up his permanent residence (in 1845) in Leipzig, which city was thenceforward to become inseparably connected with his name, and where he died at the early age of thirty-eight.

Mendelssohn was a very prolific composer. His works embrace almost every form of music except grand opera. That he found time in

his short life for the mere manual labour of putting on to paper such a quantity of music, to say nothing of its composition, seems almost incredible; especially when one bears in mind the fact that this was but a part of his busy and varied career, and that much of his time was taken up with his other professional duties and engagements as conductor and pianist, entailing long journeys from place to place—not so easy or quick a proceeding in those days when no railways existed as it is now. Moreover, his private and business correspondence was very extensive, and his letters never seemed to be hastily written, but on the contrary they were often very lengthy and always carefully thought out, both in diction and expression,—more after the manner of the gentleman of leisure, whose chief delight is letter-writing, than the active and much-sought-after artist. Under the circumstances it is remarkable that his music bears no sign of this constant pressure; everything is finished and perfect in its own way as regards both detail and form; even his manuscripts are a model of neatness, clear and distinct, with very few corrections. He often carried the germs and ideas of a work in his mind for weeks or even months (he made very few rough notes or sketches), and one reads in his letters that he constantly has the ideas for a symphony, an overture, and various other pieces running in his head all at the same time, and giving him no rest. He doubtless saw the ‘picture’ of a work or movement long before he sat down to write it, and his facile brain and pen carried him along to its completion with very little hesitation or interruption. Nevertheless he was very self-critical and often dissatisfied with his compositions in their original form, so much so that on several occasions, even after a public hearing, he revised and altered them until he succeeded in moulding them into the perfect shape his fastidious mind required. A notable instance of this is his Oratorio ‘Elijah,’ which, after having been produced at the Birmingham Festival in 1846 with the greatest possible success, he had the courage to pull to pieces from beginning to end, rewriting some of the numbers, eliminating others, and adding many entirely new ones, no doubt with infinite gain to the work itself, which in its new form was once more issued to the world as the ‘Elijah’ we all know so well.

To give a complete and detailed list of all Mendelssohn's compositions would take up several pages, but his chief works may here be enumerated.

Choral Works.—‘Walpurgis Night,’ ‘St. Paul,’ ‘Hymn of Praise,’ ‘Elijah,’ ‘Athalie,’ ‘Ædipus,’ ‘Antigone,’ Finale to ‘Lorelei’ (for soprano and chorus), several Psalms, etc.

Symphonies in C minor, ‘Reformation,’ ‘Italian,’ and ‘Scotch.’

Overtures.—‘Midsummer Night’s Dream,’ ‘Hebrides,’ ‘Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage,’ ‘Ruy Blas,’ ‘Melusine,’ ‘Trumpet.’

Concertos, etc.—Piano Concerto in G minor, Piano Concerto in D minor, Capriccio in B minor, Rondo in E flat, Serenade and Allegro in D, Violin Concerto in E minor.

Chamber Music.—Three Quartets for Piano and Strings, two Trios for Piano, Violin, and Violoncello, Octet for Strings, two Quintets for Strings, several String Quartets, Sonata for Piano and Violin, two Sonatas for Piano and Violoncello, Variations Sérieuses for Piano, Fantasia for Piano, Scherzos, Capriccios, Preludes and Fugues, etc. Also innumerable Songs, Duets, Part Songs, Motets, etc.

Organ.—Six Sonatas, etc.

Operettas.—‘Camacho,’ ‘Son and Stranger,’ and several early ones.

A few remarks on the general character and style of Mendelssohn's music may not be inappropriate to the scheme of this article. His compositions are all marked by extreme grace and refinement, and musicianly scholarship; at times full of sparkling vivacity, at others tinged with melancholy; if he had comparatively few really great moments, so are there few traces of absolute weakness, as may often be found in the lesser works of Mozart and other composers. He did not possess the rugged strength of Beethoven, or the poetry of Schubert, but in this regard one must bear in mind the easy circumstances in which he was placed: had he lived in an atmosphere of romance, or had he been compelled to resort to his pen for his daily bread, and suffered the privations and struggles of so many other creative artists, his music would probably have borne signs of those emotional and passionate qualities in which it was for the most part lacking.

He was an inspired melodist, though his themes, beautiful as they were, were not infrequently moulded after the same pattern. He also possessed a strongly marked style and individuality (one of the surest attributes of genius), somewhat marred, however, by perhaps unconscious mannerisms; such, for instance, as the constant repetition of a short phrase or the similarity of the harmonies he makes use of in nearly all his compositions—a fact which may account for a certain sense of monotony that one at times experiences in listening to some of his works.

That his great gifts exercised a remarkable influence over the music of his time there is no doubt. His style and form, his very mannerisms, were all copied by the 'lesser lights' and musical students, and during his life and for some twenty or more years afterwards, he was the model on which they formed their own compositions—much in the same way as so many of the young composers of to-day model their works on those of Richard Strauss. Which of the two methods is the least objectionable it is not within the province of the present writer to say, except to remark that it is perhaps easier to put together a number of discords and unplayable violin passages (without, be it acknowledged, the genius of their originator) than to write a beautiful melody, even if that melody should bear some resemblance to something we have heard before. To show how strongly Mendelssohn's influence prevailed, even among men of undoubted talent, and how generally the fashion of imitating him was recognised, the following little anecdote is worth quoting. One day in Leipzig when Hauptmann, the well-known theorist, was listening to the rehearsal of a new orchestral piece, he said, 'That sounds quite Mendelssohnian, it must be by Sterndale Bennett.'

Mendelssohn's orchestral music ranks very high among his compositions; indeed, the Overtures to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the 'Hebrides' are without doubt two of his finest efforts. It is difficult to believe that the former was composed when he was but a youth of seventeen; it is all so bright and fresh, so unlike anything that had preceded it, so true to its subject: one feels that it is thus, and thus only, that it is possible to portray in music the Fairies and their

surroundings. The source which inspired the composer in this Overture he drew from freely afterwards for many of his lighter pieces and movements, but he never improved upon it, and it remains to this day, not only a wonder of precocity, but *the* foundation-stone on which all other composers of elfin music have built their airy structures. The waywardness with which the Goddess of Music deals out her gifts to her favourites is always a mystery, but there is no greater instance of this than the fact that the two works which represent the highest phase of Mendelssohn's genius (this Overture and 'Elijah') should have been written one at the outset of his career and the other at the very end.


In the 'Hebrides' the composer again broke fresh ground. As has already been related, it was inspired by the scenery of Scotland and especially of Fingal's Cave, by which title the Overture is also known. It was his first essay in Programme Music, or rather what he understood by this term; for he preferred, in this as in all his other works of the same character, simply to convey in sounds the im-



MENDELSSOHN—A BUST MODELLED FROM LIFE
BY PROFESSOR RIETSCHEL.

pressions he derived from the scenes he saw or the drama he was illustrating (thus following the method adopted by Beethoven), rather than to attach an arbitrary label to each of his movements or themes, as has been done by so many of his successors. The Overture is a vivid picture of the rugged shores, the dashing of the waves, the shrieking of the wild birds, the alternate gloom and sunshine, which are so characteristic of the coast scenery of the Highlands. There is not the local colour in it, with respect to its themes, that there is in the 'Scotch' and 'Italian' Symphonies, but the atmosphere is more romantic than either of these and the orchestration more picturesque. On the whole it is one of his best compositions.

The Overture, 'A Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage,' written to some verses of Goethe, is in quite a different vein, both in construction and sentiment; by turns tranquil, vivacious, and dignified, as the various moods of the poem suggest themselves to his imagination. It is perhaps not so strong a work as the other two Overtures, but it contains several fine touches, such as the realistic picture of the calm sea in the opening, and the feeling of happy welcome awaiting the voyagers which pervades the music of the concluding bars. One of the most striking examples of Mendelssohn's mannerisms occurs in this work. A short

theme,  the first notes of the second subject of the

Allegro, has been used by him in every conceivable form and tempo on numberless other occasions. We find it in the Violin Concerto, in the 'Hymn of Praise,' in the D minor Trio, in fact there is scarcely a work or movement from which it is entirely absent; it crops up unexpectedly in all sorts of places, at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of a phrase; sometimes quite distinctly, at others more or less disguised, but it is there all the same if we take the trouble to look for it. Whether he was aware of this or it was purely unconscious on his part, is a matter of which we have no available proof.

Still another Overture should be mentioned, viz. *Ruy Blas*. The story of the wonderful rapidity with which this was composed has often been related, but it may possibly be new to some of those readers for whom this little volume is primarily intended. 'You wished to know,' he writes to his mother, 'what happened to the Overture to *Ruy Blas*. . . . Six or eight months since an application was made to me in favour of a representation to be given for the Theatrical Pension Fund . . . for the benefit of which *Ruy Blas* was to be given. I was requested to compose an Overture for it and the music of the romance in the piece. . . . I read the piece, which is detestable . . . and said that I had no leisure to write the Overture, but I composed the Romance for them. The performance was to take place last Monday week; on the previous Tuesday the people came to thank me politely for the Romance, and said it was a pity I had not also written an Overture, but they were perfectly

aware that time was indispensable for such a work, and the ensuing year . . . they would give me longer previous notice. This put me on my mettle. I reflected on the matter the same evening, and began my score. On Wednesday there was a concert rehearsal which occupied the whole forenoon. Thursday the concert itself, yet the Overture was in the hands of the copyist early on Friday. . . . Few of my works have caused me more amusing excitement.'

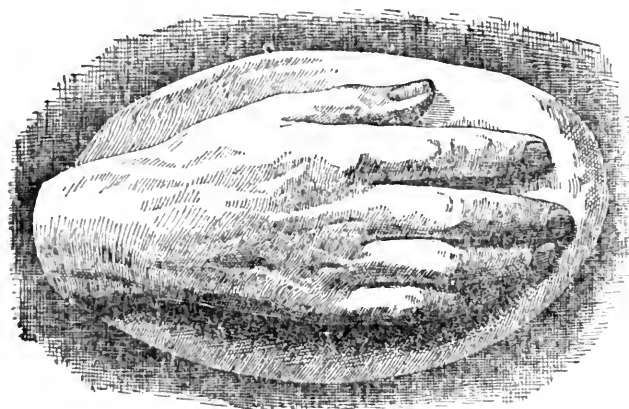
Barely two days in which to compose and commit to paper the entire work! Truly a remarkable achievement, and yet it shows no sign of having been hastily put together, but, on the contrary, is as complete and finished in every way as anything else of his. It is a brilliant piece of music, effectively scored, and has been, and still is, as every one knows, one of the most popular items in the repertoire of all orchestras. It should be remarked that Mendelssohn has employed the trombones in this score, an unusual thing for him, as he regarded these instruments as 'too sacred' for ordinary purposes, and they appear but seldom in his orchestral pieces.

The two Symphonies, the 'Italian' and the 'Scotch,' are both highly characteristic of the composer. The former is the brighter and the more spontaneous of the two, and reflects in its pages much of the light and colour of the Italian skies and the vivacity of the people, especially in the first and final movements. The latter is conceived on a larger scale, and, for the greater part, in a sadder, more poetic vein, as befits its source; and the themes, if not definitely Scotch, have no small amount of the national character about them. His other published Symphonies, No. 1 in C minor (an early effort) and the 'Reformation' (one of his least inspired works), call for no particular notice.

Mendelssohn's Chamber Music possesses all those qualities of musicianship, refinement, and melodiousness which were his special gifts. Space does not permit of more than a brief allusion to these works—of which he wrote so many—but mention should again be made of the Octet for Strings, not only on account of its precocity, but because in its Scherzo, even at that early age (sixteen), he had commenced to

invent that light, sparkling, fairy-like music which, with the composition of the *Midsummer Night's Dream* Overture the following year, was to become so typical of his genius, and of which he bequeathed to the world so many charming examples, notably in the two Piano Trios, in some of the Quartets, and in the Scherzo, composed years afterwards, for the Incidental Music to the above Shakespearian comedy.

His numerous songs, duets, part-songs, etc., all of them full of melodic charm, hardly require further description than may be gathered from what has already been said. And the same remark applies to the Piano



CAST OF MENDELSSOHN'S HAND.

Concertos and other pieces for that instrument, except that no notice of his music for the Piano would be complete without reference to the 'Songs without Words.' These exceedingly well-known little pieces are replete with variety and expressiveness, ranging from the melancholy of the 'Funeral March' to the

melodiousness of the charming 'Duet' in A flat, the gracefulness of the 'Spring Song,' and the sparkling gaiety of the so-called 'Spinning Song'; and considering how little really good music of this sort existed at the time Mendelssohn wrote them, their wide-world popularity is not to be wondered at.

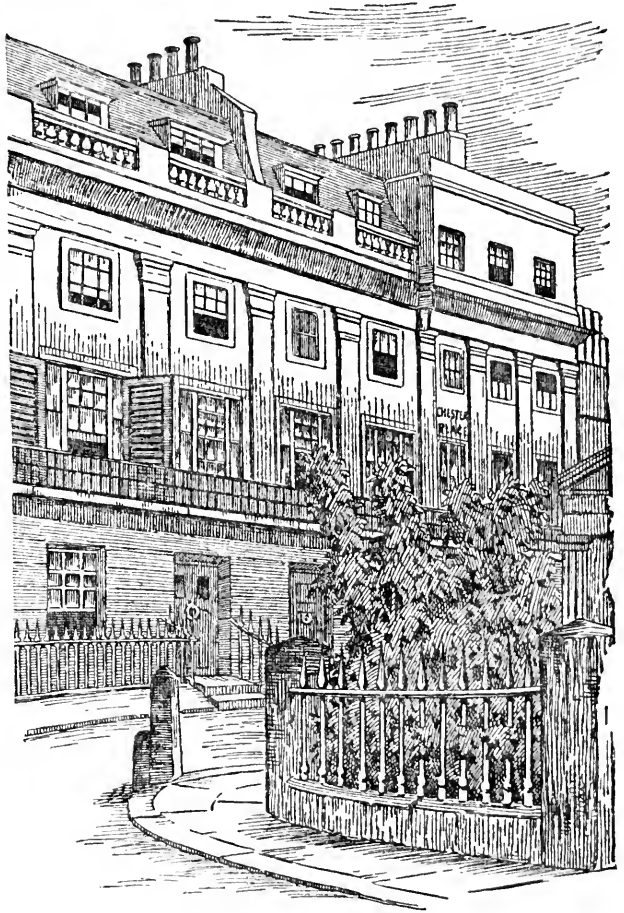
What is there new to be said about the Violin Concerto? Its many beauties have been commented upon times without number, and all terms of praise exhausted long since; it is certainly one of his most inspired and finished works. The Andante, if somewhat sentimental and 'long drawn out,' is all the same one of the most continuously beautiful melodies that he or any other composer has ever conceived, and the Finale, so light and airy in its texture, so truly Mendelssohnian,

captivates by reason of its never-flagging spirit and animation. The work is most gratefully written for the solo instrument, and scored with infinite taste and fancy, just as a Concerto should be. It is as fresh to-day as on the day it was composed (1844), and nothing seems likely to oust it from the position it holds, side by side with the other two great Concertos of Beethoven and Brahms, so long as there are violinists left to play and audiences to admire.

And now last, but certainly not least, we come to the choral works, or rather to those three which represent the composer at his best in this direction, viz. 'St. Paul,' the 'Hymn of Praise,' and 'Elijah'—the order of their composition.

Opinions as to the merits of 'St. Paul' differ considerably; in Germany, for instance, it is more highly esteemed than 'Elijah.' The work undoubtedly contains many fine numbers and much

scholarly writing, and the choruses are mostly broad and massive in effect and contrapuntally strong, but at the time when Mendelssohn wrote it (1836) he had not yet thrown off the influence of the older oratorio and ecclesiastical composers, and the style is rather heavy and severe. It suffers too from a lack of sustained interest in the subject and from the didactic nature of the words, reasons



CHESTER PLACE—FROM A DRAWING MADE BY MENDELSSOHN IN AN AUTOGRAPH ALBUM GIVEN BY HIM TO HIS GODCHILD.

which sufficiently account for the comparatively inferior position it occupies.

In the 'Hymn of Praise' all is different, and though the verses are also taken from the Bible (Mendelssohn himself compiled the three libretti, with the assistance and advice of his literary friends) there is an exuberance and a sentiment of religious hope and fervour which finds its counterpart in the music, and which cannot fail to impress itself on the listener. The form of the Cantata was suggested by Beethoven's Choral Symphony, but there is an essential difference between the two, inasmuch as the vocal portion is of much larger proportions and, in contradistinction to Beethoven's work, far superior to the symphonic movements which precede it. Amidst much fine music, the opening and final choruses, and, still more, the imposing one, 'The night is departing,' stand out pre-eminent.

With 'Elijah' Mendelssohn reached the culminating point of his career. He had the subject in his mind for several years, and as far back as 1838 we find him busy with the compilation of the libretto, though the work was not destined to be completed until six years later. He was as usual very careful and fastidious about the words, but from the first his desire was for something of a dramatic character. 'It appears to me,' he writes, 'that the dramatic should predominate—the personages should be introduced as acting and speaking with fervour; not, however, . . . to become mere musical pictures, but inhabitants of a positive practical world.' It is this human element, coupled of course with the highly appropriate setting it inspired, that has given the Oratorio so great a hold on the musical world, and it is just in those scenes which so vividly illustrate the stirring episodes of this old Biblical drama that the music rises to its greatest height. What need to say more, when every note is as familiar as 'household words'! The production of the Oratorio at the Birmingham Festival in 1846 and its phenomenal success are matters of history, and the way in which Mendelssohn, even after this success, revised and altered the work into its present shape has already been spoken of. 'Elijah' was his last great effort. He composed one or two works after this of minor importance, and portions of others, such as

‘Lorelei,’ ‘Christus,’ etc. ; but he had ‘burnt the candle at both ends’ ; the wear and tear of such a strenuous life, and the strain on his highly strung and sensitive nature were too much for him, and within little more than a year after the production of ‘Elijah’ (4th November 1847) he had breathed his last. If the belief is true that we are all permitted to live until we have fulfilled our mission on this earth, then Mendelssohn’s death was perhaps not so premature as we in our ignorance of the Reason for all things would tell ourselves. His powers were beginning to fail him—as the ‘Christus’ fragments prove to us—and the ‘sacred fire’ growing dim : he had spoken his message to the world, and left it richer than he found it. And yet, had he been spared and restored to health and strength, what further treasures might he not have bestowed upon us. Who can tell ?



MENDELSSOHN'S STUDY—FROM A WATER-COLOUR MADE BY FELIX MOSCHELES A FEW DAYS AFTER THE COMPOSER'S DEATH.

‘You wish me to write operas only. . . . I answer, place a fit libretto in my hand, and in two months the work shall be completed, for every day I long more and more to write an opera. I think it might become something fresh and spirited, if I had a subject ; but I have got no words yet, and I assuredly will not write music for any poetry that does not inspire me with enthusiasm. If you know a man capable of writing the

libretto of an opera, for Heaven's sake tell me his name, I ask no more !'

Thus Mendelssohn, in a letter to the actor Devrient. Throughout his life it was his great ambition to write a grand opera. He was always attracted by the glamour of the stage, and even in his very early youth composed several operettas, and, later on, 'Camacho' and the 'Son and Stranger' (written for the silver wedding of his parents), but his one desire was to try his hand at something on a larger and more important scale. He speaks and writes about it often and often, and the idea is never absent for long from his mind. He even received several commissions from theatres, which, however, never seem to have come to anything. The one necessity, a good libretto, was not forthcoming, and as we have seen, he would not make an attempt until he had found a book absolutely suited to his taste. So the years passed, and he was never destined to realise his greatest wish. Whether he would have succeeded in this branch of his art as he did in nearly all others, is a matter not easy to decide; the portions he left of 'Lorelei' are scarcely sufficient proof. Still, the dramatic power shown in 'Elijah' and in 'Will the night soon pass,' and the succeeding chorus in the 'Hymn of Praise,' point to the possession of a true instinct for the stage, and this, together with his strong sense of local colour and fitness, and his great melodic gifts, would lead us to believe that had he found subjects suited to his own individuality he might have enriched the stores of musical drama with treasures worthy to take their place beside those of Mozart and Weber.

That Mendelssohn was an excellent pianist his compositions for that instrument give ample evidence. He began to play in public when he was nine years old, and continued to do so all his life. Judging from the present standpoint, his playing would not perhaps be considered to exhibit those qualities of physical strength and manual dexterity with which we associate the *virtuoso* of to-day, but it must have been full of fire and animation, grace and expressiveness, and he must have had an excellent technique; at all events, it captivated his audience, and he was as popular an executant as he was a composer. We read of people vying with each other to obtain fingers of his gloves and other mementoes after

his performances, which shows that feminine hero-worship and musical fanaticism were as rife in those days as they are now.

He also played the violin and viola, the latter for preference, and often took part in the Chamber Music which was a frequent feature of the musical life of his home. But his favourite instrument was the organ, and he not only gave public exhibitions of his skill, but he delighted in seeking out organs wherever he went, even in the most out-of-the-way places, and seeing what he could make of them.

He excelled in the art of extemporising, and many are the accounts given of the fascination which his great facility in this direction exercised over his hearers. But although he indulged in it frequently, and was such a wonderful adept at it, it does not appear—to judge from his own words—to have afforded him any great pleasure.

‘The King (at a concert in Munich) had given me the theme of “Non piū andrai” on which I was to improvise. My former opinion is now fully confirmed, that it is an absurdity to extemporise in public. I have seldom felt so like a fool as when I took my place at the piano, to present to the public the fruits of my inspiration. . . . I was annoyed, for I was far from being satisfied with myself, and I am resolved never again to extemporise in public—it is both an abuse and an absurdity.’

However, notwithstanding what he felt about it, he evidently could not resist the display of this special talent, for barely two months later we find him giving another improvisation in Paris. This time he was in a more contented frame of mind. ‘I was in the vein to extemporise successfully, and felt that I did so.’

As a conductor he was always much in request. Besides directing innumerable separate concerts in the chief cities of Europe, he was conductor of several of the Rhine Festivals, of the St. Cecilia Society in Frankfurt, of the London Philharmonic (for one season), and of the Gewandhaus Concerts in Leipzig.

His connection with Leipzig, it should be noted, was not only as Kapellmeister, but another and still more important link with that city was the Conservatoire of Music, which owed its existence entirely to his

initiative. It was a pet scheme of his, and with the aid of a bequest of money left for this purpose by a Leipzig gentleman at the disposal of the King of Saxony, he was enabled to bring his project to a successful issue. He gathered round him all the best professors he could find, giving lessons himself and superintending everything with his usual untiring energy; and although the period of his association with the institution was destined to be but a short one, he lived long enough to see it firmly and prosperously established. For many years the Conservatoire was the goal of musical students from all parts of the world, and even after nearly seven decades, its one-time glory and reputation have not entirely departed from it.

Mendelssohn had a true and never-ceasing affection for the members of his family. All of them, parents, sisters, and brother, seem to have shared in his devotion and sympathy; but if he could be said to have had a favourite, it was his sister Fanny. All were more or less musical, but she was the most gifted, being also a composer of no mean attainments. Many are the charming letters he wrote her, full of happy sayings, amusing descriptions, and brotherly advice; at one time sending her a piece of his own composition for her birthday; at another writing little verses like the following:

‘This little page shall go to Rome from here,
And wish you prettily a good new year’—

and so on. That he thought highly of her talent there can be no doubt, for he says to her, ‘You know well how much I love *all* your productions, and some of them are especially dear to my heart,’—and this was no mere brotherly compliment, as is shown by the fact that he published some of her songs under his own name.

Like many other young men, he often spoke of himself as a ‘confirmed bachelor,’ but also, like many others, he had to succumb when the right moment came. In 1836, in Frankfurt, he met the beautiful Cecile Jeanrenaud, fell in love with her, and married her the following spring. The union was in every respect a felicitous one, and unobscured in its happiness for the ten short years fate permitted it to last.

Another delightful trait in Mendelssohn’s character was his genuine love of fun of all sorts. His thorough enjoyment of this, together with his

inexhaustible flow of high spirits and his genial ways, were quite sufficient to make him a general favourite everywhere, without the glamour that surrounded him as a musician. He was also very fond of children, and was never happier than when he could enter into their innocent amusements, which he always did with childlike delight and enthusiasm. Felix Moscheles (his godson), in his *Fragments of an Autobiography*, speaks of the games he and his godfather used to have when the former was a little boy. 'He could throw my ball further than any one else, and he could run faster too, but then, for all that, *I* could catch him.' And his



FACSIMILE SCORE—'THE CRADLE SONG.'

(Moscheles') mother also records how 'in the evening Felix junior had such a tremendous romp with his godfather that the whole house shook,' and she adds, 'One can scarcely realise that the man who would presently be improvising in his grandest style was the Felix senior, the king of games and romps.'

Though not actually a wit himself, he had a keen sense of humour and often a droll way of expressing himself; as for example when he relates how he was summoned to play before the Queen of Bavaria, and how, after he had finished, she complimented him on the wonderful power he possessed of carrying away his audience, on which 'I begged to apologise for carrying away Her Majesty.'

There was nothing petty or mean in his nature, and he hated anything approaching to deceit or meanness in others. He was not conceited or wrapped up in himself, but was generous in his appreciation of talent when he found it, though he could also express his opinions frankly enough when anything did not please him. He gave a helping hand to many young composers, such as Gade and Sterndale Bennett, by performing their compositions, and he was the means of rescuing many works—Bach's 'Passion' among the number—from the oblivion or comparative neglect into which they had fallen.

Mendelssohn was a frequent visitor to London, his stay often extending over several months. He was as fond of the English people as they were of him, and always seemed to enjoy himself thoroughly, even in the smoke and fog of the place which, he says in his youth, 'is fated to be now and ever my favourite residence.' He was no recluse, but on the contrary, as we know, very sociably inclined, and delighted in the society of his friends, whose name was legion. He spent his time between composing, conducting, and playing at concerts; going to balls, receptions, and dinners. He was invited on more than one occasion to Buckingham Palace to play to Queen Victoria, who was very partial to his music, and to accompany her in his own songs. In fact, he was fêted wherever he went and by all grades of society. Altogether his life in London must have been a constant whirl of pleasure and excitement, enough to turn his head, had he not been made of stronger stuff. But what pleased his ingenious nature most, in the midst of all this success and adulation, were the impromptu proofs of his personal and artistic popularity which came to him from his colleagues and the public at unexpected moments. As instances of this, two more excerpts from his letters (the last to be given) may here be quoted: 'Lately I went to a concert at Exeter Hall where I had nothing whatever to do, and was sauntering in quite coolly . . . when just as I came in at the door, such a clamour, and clapping, and shouting, and standing up ensued, that I had no idea at first that I was concerned in it; but I discovered it was so, when on reaching my place, I found Sir Robert Peel and Lord Wharncliffe close to me, who continued

to applaud with the rest till I made my bow and thanked them. . . . When I left the concert they gave me another hurrah.'

The other occasion was at the Philharmonic.

'There was a rehearsal last Saturday . . . where, however, nothing of mine was given. . . . After Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony, during which I was in a box, I wished to go into the room to talk to some old friends; scarcely, however, had I gone down below, when one of the orchestra called out, "There is Mendelssohn!" on which they all began shouting and clapping their hands . . . and when this was over another called out "Welcome to him!" on which the same uproar recommenced, and I was obliged . . . to clamber into the orchestra and return thanks. Never can I forget it, for it was more precious to me than any distinction, as it showed me that the *musicians* loved me . . . and I cannot tell you what a glad feeling this was.'

England was the first country to fully recognise the young composer's exceptional gifts, as she was the one with which his last and greatest success was for ever to become associated.



MENDELSSOHN'S STATUE AT LEIPZIG

This, then, is the life and career of Mendelssohn, as far as it has been possible to portray it within the limits of these pages. Few men have been so gifted, so widely accomplished; few artists so popular. This popularity he never sought (preferring to write what was in his heart, independently of any momentary result), but it came to him, nevertheless, without the seeking, and he surely deserved it. It has become the fashion

of late among ultra-modern musicians and hypercritical *dilettanti* to treat Mendelssohn's music somewhat contemptuously, for the reason possibly that nothing excites their enthusiasm that is not, to them, more or less incoherent and unintelligible; but though times may change and Art be progressive (?), it is surely still possible to admire clearness of expression and beauty of form—two of Music's greatest attributes.

However, let it be said, the great mass of music-lovers and broad-minded musicians are little influenced by these opinions, and the composer and his works still hold a place in their esteem and affection which, though it may be shared by other great tone poets, is never likely to become vacant. If Mendelssohn did not rise to the very greatest heights, he came within measurable distance of them. His music bears the stamp of his cultured mind, and his high level of excellence is undeniable. He possessed (to emphasise once again his pre-eminent qualities) great melodic charm, refinement of expression, scholarly writing, and at times considerable power and virility; in addition, a gaiety and animation, a *joie de vivre*, which were the outcome of his happy and light-hearted nature. Above all, he had an individuality of style which was as novel as it was, and still is, fascinating—a style peculiarly his own, and one which, as is the case with all great innovators, many have imitated but none have equalled. His was one of the most remarkable instances of early artistic maturity: he never fulfilled the promise of his youth; nor did he climb on his own shoulders, for the reason that he came before the world a fully-fledged artist; there was room for experience, but none for actual development, and he was as much the real Mendelssohn when he began his career as he was when his life and his work were ended.

Undoubtedly he was a genius, if not perhaps among the very highest of the 'elect'; and had he never written anything else but the *Midsummer Night's Dream* Overture, the Violin Concerto, and 'Elijah,' he would still be entitled to that prominent niche in the Temple of Fame which he occupies, and from which he is not likely ever to be deposed.

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